



State of Mind by Mad Hatter - J

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Summary: When a mysterious woman arrives in Hawkins, Police Chief Jim Hopper finds himself seeking some answers...and getting to know her along the way. (Slight AU, set before and during series. Rated M for future adult situations.)

1. Chapter 1: The Drifter

THE DRIFTER

It was blowing up a gale in Hawkins County, dead leaves dancing with discarded trash in the gutters, bare-branched trees swaying haphazardly as they fought to remain rooted in the soft dirt. Rain came down in heavy sheets, making it near impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. The sky was dark and ominous, lit by the occasional flash of lightning, giving those unfortunate enough to find themselves caught in the middle of the downpour a brief moment to regain their bearings before continuing on their way to the nearest shelter.

Police Chief Jim Hopper leaned forward in the driver's seat of his truck, attempting to get a better look at the road, glaring at the thick rivulets of water that ran down his windscreen as if the sudden onslaught of horrible weather had come about purely to inconvenience him. Resting back once more, expression bitter, he flicked on his high beams, certain he was the only one stupid enough to be out in this, and glanced at the case of cheap beer on the passenger seat beside him. The sight of the alcohol lent him some comfort at least, knowing the direction the rest of his night was going to take.

Police chatter crackled over his radio and he was quick to reach over and switch it off, opting instead to flick on the public station as the latest rock tunes came filtering through. It had been a long day of dealing with trivial complaints that the citizens of Hawkins seemed to deem too important for the other officers to handle, and so rather than palming off the grunt work like he normally would, he had found himself making house calls over stolen garden gnomes and petty neighborhood disputes.

Jim Hopper was not what one might consider a people person. Gifted with the cynicism and dark wit of someone who had been exposed to some of the worst sides of humanity, he was a man who truly appreciated his seclusion but was very rarely awarded it. Notorious for his foul moods, crude humor and generally poor work ethic, he had just the right amount of charm and good looks to coax the less-

discriminating kinds of women into his bed, and then just the right amount of apathy to never call them again.

Everyone in Hawkins knew his history. He had moved from the town to become a big city cop, but somewhere along the way his blossoming career had taken a tumble. It was widely agreed that the only reason he had acquired the position of chief on his return to their humble little county was because no one else had wanted it. Not a lot happened in Hawkins, and for a man who would rather waste away the hours drinking than solving the case of the missing garden ornament, that worked just fine for Hopper. Here in Hawkins, the streets tended to keep themselves clean.

*Oh, is it any wonder the streets are dark
Is it any wonder we fall apart*

Thunder boomed overhead as Hopper glanced up through his windshield to the doomsday-darkened sky. Seconds later lightning flashed bright, illuminating the road ahead of him and casting silhouettes of the stark surrounding forest across his dash.

*Day after day straight rain falls down
All over town, rain come*

Focusing his attention back on the road, he narrowed his eyes at the fitting tune coming from his radio as if it were mocking his current predicament, and reached up to change the station, glancing between the stereo needle and the barely-visible road.

It's been raining for so long

Just as he made to adjust the dial, he spotted a dark shape moving in the opposite direction on the side of the road, doing a double take as he suddenly forgot about the music. He slowed his vehicle as he approached the sodden shape, winding his window down, letting in a cold blast in the process. He silently cursed the hitchhiker as the chill worked quickly to eliminate all heat from his once-comfortable truck interior.

*Don't you go out in the rain
Don't go out in the pourin' rain*

Squinting against the deluge, he tried to make out the figure, the occasional drop of water splashing against his exposed face. The next flash of lightning lit up the sky and surrounding woodland, revealing the person mad enough to be strolling down a dark road in the middle of a storm.

"Miss?" he called to her, mustering up what remained of his 'good cop' manners, a feat he struggled with at the best of times. When she failed to respond, he immediately dropped back to his usual demeanor. "Hey! You!"

As if finally giving in to his brazen attempts to get her attention, the woman swung back around to look at him, eyes squinting against the bright light flooding from his high beams. Expecting a grateful smile, or even some sort of desperate request for a lift into town, he was surprised instead to find her simply staring back at him, as if waiting for some sort of explanation as to this sudden disruption to her day. His frown deepened.

"Are you okay, miss?"

She nodded. "I'm fine." She glanced up the road, then looked back at him as if to see if he was done with his line of questioning, giving a challenging raise of the eyebrows as he merely stared back. Hopper sighed as she turned to continue on her way, knowing his next words could very well spell the end of any hope he might have had for a peaceful evening.

"Do you need a lift somewhere, or...?"

"No."

"Where are you headin'?"

She looked back at him again as she came to a halt, adjusting the strap of the pack on her shoulder, considering him steadily.

"Into town."

"I see that," he told her, fighting to keep the sarcastic edge from his voice. "You know, it's not safe to be walking along a road in the dark. Car comes along, you take a step in the wrong direction...Look, why

don't you let me take you to wherever it is you're going? Better than walking around in this."

He couldn't believe he was saying it – he could have just ignored her, kept on driving, saved himself the headache. Then again, if she *was* to wind up involved in some kind of accident, the paperwork alone would have had him wishing he had done something for her.

"I'm fine," she told him again, something in her cool gaze managing to convince him that she meant it. "Fresh air might do me some good."

He stared at her for a second, fighting the urge to drive off and leave her to her own stupidity. But there was something odd about her behavior. Maybe she was high. Or drunk. She barely even seemed to register the weather; her soaked clothes and hair clinging to her pale face and body, skin slick with the icy raindrops. She had to be freezing.

"You do realize it's raining, right?" he said, no longer able to hold back on the mocking tone.

She glanced up at the sky then threw him a look.

"Have you been drinking?" he asked, his old cop instinct suddenly kicking in as he observed her listless demeanor. He could arrest her for drunk and disorderly at least, put her in the holding cell overnight, get her out of the wet weather. He caught her glance behind him into the truck, where his liquid dinner sat, and watched her lips curl into a small, mocking smirk.

"No, sir," she replied.

He eyed her, unconvinced.

"You gonna arrest me, officer?"

"I'm thinking about it," he told her, eyes narrowing beneath his heavy brow. Her smirk widened. She glanced up at the blackened sky once again, closing her eyes for a moment as if enjoying the feel of the falling rain, then smoothed her hair back against her scalp. He watched her, quickly growing impatient. "Look, you can stay out here

and freeze to death if you want, or you can-

"Accept a lift from the cop who won't stop harassing me for exercising my right to free movement?"

His expression quirked into a sarcastic smile before falling back into general discontent. Why did he even bother? "Alright. Fine. Forget it. Have fun with your hypothermia."

She smiled as if accepting the challenge, then started back on her way towards the distant lights of the town center. "You have yourself a good night, officer," she called to him.

"Yeah. I'll do that," he replied bitterly as he glared after her, still kicking himself for bothering to stop in the first place. Shaking his head, he wound up his window, muttering to himself as he rolled back onto the road. He glanced back at the receding figure in his rearview mirror, but it wasn't long before the surrounding darkness swallowed her up.

He awoke the following morning to a pounding headache, stomach lurching as he sat up and threw his legs over the side of his bed. He rubbed his eyes as he began to fight off this latest hangover, struggling to remember how far he had gotten through the case of beer; not really caring. He reached for the pack of cigarettes on his night stand, sighing as he noticed the time on the alarm clock he had forgotten to set.

"Goddamn it."

He was running late again. One of the few perks of being the chief, though, he really only had himself to answer to. He had grown to ignore the judgmental looks of his colleagues; he'd had four years to get used to them, after all. Dragging himself out of bed, he managed a quick shower, squinting against the bright, fluorescent bathroom light as he stood in front of the mirror afterwards brushing his teeth. He glanced at his razor as he spat into the sink, and considered shaving – the same way he had almost every morning for the past couple of weeks – but the situation had gone a little beyond stubble; he had pretty much accepted he was now growing a beard, and that

worked just fine for him.

He grabbed the cleanest looking uniform he had, having forgotten once again the pile of dirty clothes that had been awaiting his attention for a while now, and proceeded to tug it on over his ever-growing beer gut. He had been loath to discover just the week before that he had gone up yet another notch on his belt; all the nights of heavy drinking, breakfasts of coffee and donuts, and dinners of greasy take-away starting to catch up to him. And he was sure the meds weren't helping any. He picked up a bottle now, downing a couple of the capsules dry before pocketing the bright orange container and heading for the door. He glanced around at his living room as he pinned on his 'Chief of Police' badge and took his hat off the rack by the door, counting a good dozen empty beer cans scattered over the coffee table and surrounding carpet, adding the mess to his ever-growing, ever-ignored, list of things to do. The whole cabin smelled of stale beer, spoiled leftovers and cigarette smoke – the combined scents of an aging bachelor who had simply given up.

Stepping out into the fresh morning air, he pulled out his half-full pack of cigarettes and tapped one out, sliding it between his lips as he moved towards his truck. Glancing at his watch as he dug around in his pockets for his lighter, he was reminded once again just how late he was running. Stomach rumbling, head still throbbing, he decided to stop in to Benny's diner on the way for a greasy hangover cure and a strong cup of coffee. It wasn't as if he could be any later than he already was.

Benny's was generally quiet this time of day; the lull between the early morning breakfast rush, and the busy lunchtime rush providing the perfect opening for the antisocial patron. Hopper took off his hat as he stepped inside, looking around for his old friend. He spotted him out in the kitchen grilling burgers, garbed in his usual grease-stained apron. Glancing around, Hopper gave a nod to the two older men in one of the nearby booths – a couple of regulars he knew from around town – eyes drifting over to the one other customer seated in the far corner before he turned back to wait for Benny. He froze. He had almost forgotten about the woman from the night before.

"Hey, Hop," Benny greeted as he approached the chief carrying a couple of baskets of burgers and fries, frowning at the look on his friend's face as he set the orders down on the occupied table. "Hop?"

Hopper tore his gaze from the woman in the corner, catching the knowing look in the cook's eye – a look that suggested he knew exactly where Hopper's intentions lay. But as the chief looked over at her, recalling her bizarre behavior from the night before, he found it difficult to adopt the same mindset.

"Fresh face, huh?"

"You know her?" Hopper asked, ignoring the man's insinuating stare, glancing back at the woman as she focused on the newspaper in front of her.

"Nope. Kinda wish I did though, know what I mean?" he grinned, as he sat back against the empty table behind them, arms folded, a red-checked dish towel clutched in one hand. They both stared over at her as she continued to remain oblivious to their attention.

In the morning light, dressed in dry clothes, auburn hair falling in messy waves over her shoulders, she was a far cry from the soaking stranger he had met out on the road, but her face was unmistakable. He had barely noticed the night before, too distracted in his rush to get home and get drunk, the gloom of the storm not doing her any justice either, but, crazy or not, she was admittedly pretty. He watched as she quietly sipped her coffee, feeling that same curiosity that had made him pull over the night before.

"She say anything?" he asked Benny.

He shook his head. "Not really. Came in, ordered coffee and asked for this morning's paper. Doesn't seem like the chatty type. Friendly enough, though."

"Right," Hopper said, barely listening.

"You okay, Hop?"

"Yeah, just fine," he replied, moving off towards her.

The woman was still quietly engaged in one of the news articles when he stopped by her table. He hesitated for a moment, quietly debating whether or not to disturb her, before finally deciding to speak.

"See you made it into town." He winced, only struck by how stupid he sounded as the words left his mouth. Great opener.

She glanced up at him, eyes darting from his face to his badge with an unreadable expression, before quickly turning her gaze back to the newspaper.

"They hire you for your observational skills, chief?"

He gave a soft snort. Okay, he'd walked into that one. He stepped back as Benny joined them brandishing a fresh pot of coffee, staring down at his hat, fingers playing with the brim.

"You need anything else, sweetheart?" Benny asked her, refilling her mug.

She glanced up at Hopper as she turned the page, then back at her server as she replied with a pleasant smile, "That's fine, thanks."

"For you, Hop?" Benny looked to him, his own friendly smile dropping to a frown at the odd way the chief was regarding the woman, as if something about her made him uneasy.

"Uh, coffee and one of those bacon and egg sandwiches. Thanks." Benny gave a nod, glancing between the chief and the woman once more before moving off to grab the requested items. "Make that to go, Benny," Hopper called after him.

"Sure thing, Hop."

Hopper turned back, eyes narrowed at the woman's continued attempts to ignore him. He considered leaving her alone, but his curiosity got the better of him. She glanced up at him again, feeling his unrelenting gaze. Normally he had no issues talking to women – though to be fair most of the ones who ended up in his company in the dive bars he frequented were usually just the right amount of tipsy to not require a whole lot of conversation to keep them

engaged. Yet here he was wishing this one would give him something to work with.

"You wanna tell me what you were doing out on that road last night?" he asked her.

"Thought I already did."

"Heading into town. Right. From where, exactly?"

Now that he got a closer look at her – the faded, worn look of her jeans and plaid shirt, her military-green backpack riddled with holes and a myriad of stains – she came across as someone who had been on the road for a long time. Her long, wild hair looked like it hadn't seen a pair of scissors in years, and she had the frame of someone who didn't see regular meals all that often. Still, despite her appearance, she seemed in reasonable health. Catching the hesitant frown that crossed her features, he went on, "It's my job to ask these things. Don't get a whole lot of strangers in these parts."

"You ever see that movie *Rambo*, chief?" she asked, holding him in a steady gaze, the hint of a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah," he frowned, curious where she was heading with this.

"This the kind of town that don't take too kindly to drifters passing through?"

His eyes narrowed further at the reference, then took on a skeptical tone. "You sayin' you're a drifter?"

The corner of her mouth curled up. "Not answering that until you answer mine."

He gave another amused huff. "As long as you don't cause any trouble on your way through, makes no difference to me."

"Because you still got that look in your eyes like you wanna slap a pair of cuffs on me," she said, gaze trained on him as she took a sip of her coffee. There was a strange, playful undertone to the way she said it, and for a moment he couldn't help but wonder if she didn't mean it in a not-entirely-professional way. Before he could allow his

thoughts to drift into inappropriate territory, he caught her looking down at the blue bracelet around his wrist. He watched the curious look cross her features, same as it did with most people who noticed the out-of-place keepsake, but what disturbed him more was the look that followed after it. She glanced away suddenly, appearing to lose some of her earlier self-assured attitude. "Well, uh, I don't intend on starting a coup out in the woods or anything, so I'd say you're pretty safe," she went on, voice a little softer than before.

"Good to know," he replied, eyeing her warily.

The brief moment of silence that followed was interrupted as Benny returned carrying the chief's order. He glanced between the two of them once more, sensing the odd tension as he passed him the paper bag and takeaway coffee cup. Hopper tore his gaze from the woman as he placed the coffee down on the table, and reached for his wallet to pay his tab, but movement across the table caught his attention. The woman held out a ten dollar bill to Benny, who hesitated before accepting it. He glanced at the chief to see how this sat with him, but Hopper was busy eyeing the generous stranger once more.

"Thanks," he said slowly, looking more suspicious than grateful, brow deeply furrowed. She smiled.

He exchanged one last glance with Benny before heading for the door, replacing his hat as he stepped out into the late-morning warmth. It wasn't until he climbed back into his truck that he realized he hadn't even bothered asking her name. Though given his track record with women lately, he was sure it wouldn't have been long before he had forgotten it anyway.

Seated in an office that smelled of coffee, stale cigarette smoke and his favorite brand of cheap aftershave, Hopper waved off the station's old, bespectacled secretary, Florence, for the fourth time in an hour, taking a drag from his cigarette as he balanced the phone between his ear and shoulder. She rolled her eyes at his continued avoidance of any actual police work, and dumped some paperwork on his desk, ignoring the look of disdain he shot in her direction as she headed back towards the front reception area.

"You there, chief?"

"Yeah," he replied, straightening in his seat as he took another drag of his smoke.

"No reports of anything like that happening down here. All our guests are still checked in." They gave a good-humored little chuckle at their own choice of words, but he didn't return it, too deep in thought to even notice.

Fueled by his increasing suspicions, Hopper had found himself driven to put his position to some actual use for once, contacting neighboring stations, as well as a number of mental institutions across the state, for any possible leads on the self-proclaimed 'drifter'. Pennhurst Psychiatric Hospital had been his last port of call, all the others having already told him the same thing – there were no reports of escaped patients; no fugitives on the run. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to that woman than she was letting on; she certainly had the look of someone who was running from something, or maybe she had been for a while now. Realizing this was the most amount of voluntary work he had done in a long time, he continued to try and convince himself he was doing it for the good of the town, and not out of his own personal interest – though for those who had gotten to know him over the past four years, the latter would have made much more sense. Sighing, he thanked the nurse and hung up, rubbing his eyes, cigarette balanced between the fingers of the same hand.

"Chief?"

He looked up at the officer in the doorway – Deputy Powell, one of the few people he actually got along with on occasion.

"What?" he replied, with a little more force than intended after the hour of fruitless phone calls.

"Just got a call from Larry Edwards up at the bank," Powell told him, frowning at his tone.

"Yeah, and?"

"Says there's been some kind of robbery down there. Thought we oughta go check it out."

The chief shot him a look, as if offended by the idea of actually carrying out the work he was paid to do, and blew out the last puff of his cigarette in one quick huff. Stubbing out the butt in his overflowing ashtray, he got to his feet and grabbed his hat off the nearby coat stand, ready to head out.

"How much did you say was taken?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Right." Hopper glanced around inside the bank. He had expected shattered glass, shaken staff, some sign of the crime that had gone down there; but the only thing even slightly off was the mildly-dazed expressions on the faces of those involved. The woman in front of him now, the teller who had interacted directly with the thief, continued to frown down at the floor, as if struggling to recall the events that had taken place a mere fifteen minutes earlier.

"And what sort of weapon did they have?" Hopper continued, brows pulling together as he observed her. Beside him, Deputy Powell hovered the point of his pen over his small notepad, ready to jot down the rest of her statement.

"Oh, no weapon," she assured them.

"Okay. Did they use any physical force? Make threats? Anything like that?"

"No."

"Right."

He turned, frowning, to the bank's manager, Larry. Dressed in an inexplicably cheap, brown suit, dark hair parted and neatly combed, the man looked equally perplexed.

"So, by my understanding, this person just walked in, asked for money, and you, what, just gave it to them?"

Larry glanced at him, one hand on his hip, the other pressed to his forehead as he fought to figure out what exactly had happened.

"You called this in as a robbery, right?" the chief confirmed.

"It was. I mean, you have to understand, we don't just give money out to whoever asks for it."

"Yeah, but is that not what happened?" he asked, fighting to keep the infringing apathy from his voice, "I mean, that's what it sounds like you're telling me."

Larry exchanged a look with his colleague, then they both turned back to him with similarly unhelpful expressions. Hopper exchanged a skeptical glance with Powell.

"Look, they must have threatened me, or something," Larry said, "Maybe I'm in shock and I just can't remember. That happens, right? Traumatic memory loss, something like that?"

Hopper gave a very unconvincing 'Yeah', and continued to look around the room, spotting the red, blinking light of a camera in the corner.

"That thing actually work?" he asked.

"Of course," the bank's owner replied, as if it were a silly question. Hopper shot him a look and took off to find the receiving end of the security set up.

Moments later they were standing in front of a set of screens, each showing a different area of the bank. The young, bored-looking man in charge of surveillance was busy rolling back on the footage of the main entrance, ignoring the impatient looks he was receiving from the police chief as he took his time moving through it.

"There!" Larry said, pointing to the screen as the guard froze the image.

Hopper gave a tired sigh as he pulled out his pack of cigarettes, slipping one between his lips as he leaned in for a better look at this supposed perp. Plucking the smoke from his mouth, he moved in

closer with an expression of disbelief.

"That one? Right there?" he asked, jabbing his finger at the familiar figure on the screen, looking back between Larry and the teller.

"That's her," Larry confirmed, the teller giving her own nod of assent.

Hopper tensed his jaw as he straightened back up again.

"Chief?" Powell said, catching the look on his boss's face. Hopper didn't reply. He watched as the woman walked up to the teller, who smiled all throughout the exchange that followed and then disappeared momentarily off screen. Larry soon appeared on the footage, smiling and nodding as the woman spoke with him. They watched as the grainy image of the manager opened the drawer behind the counter and took out a large wad of cash. He presented it to the woman, who took it with a warm smile, then he waved her a friendly goodbye as she departed. Hopper turned back to Larry.

"Robbery, huh?"

"Like I said, I would never just give out that amount of money, no paperwork, no identification. That woman is in possession of stolen funds!"

Fostering his characteristic look of weary displeasure, a look that seemed to make frequent appearances when in the company of the general public, Hopper glanced back at his deputy, who merely shrugged. He sighed again as he replaced his hat, and headed back towards the door.

"You're going to make an arrest, right?" Larry called after him, turning his pleading look on Powell as the deputy followed after his chief.

Hopper turned back to him, shoving his cigarette back between his lips, speaking around it, "Yeah. We'll get right on it."

He spotted her strolling down the main street later that afternoon, the blue and green of her plaid shirt colorfully offsetting the red and orange of the fallen autumn leaves around her. After passing by a

burger joint of the way back from the bank, the smell of grilled meat and hot fries had followed him all the way back to the station and left him with a hankering for his second unhealthy meal of the day. Dodging Powell's line of questioning over his obvious familiarity with the bank 'thief', as well as Flo's continued insistence that he finish off some of the reports that had been sitting on his desk for over a week now, he managed to make his escape into the solitude of his truck, heading out for a late lunch.

Pulling up in front of a video store now, he watched her for a moment as she walked by. For a woman who had just stolen a grand in cash, she looked remarkably cheery. He stepped out of his truck, adjusting his belt, realizing for the second time that day that he still didn't know her name. Failing to come up with any better way to grab her attention, he found himself resorting back to his same initial tactics.

"Hey!"

She turned to face him flashing a pretty smile. Against his will, he felt himself smile back, then quickly corrected his expression back to his usual surly disapproval.

"Afternoon, officer," she greeted, adjusting the strap of her pack. He gazed at her for a moment, still unsure how to take her as she stared back with an air of inexplicable cool.

"I'm gonna need you to step over to the vehicle," he told her, momentarily distracted by that mischievous glint in her sharp, green eyes.

"Is there a problem?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

She quirked an eyebrow, as if he made a fair point, then turned to continue on her way. Frowning at her complete disregard for his orders, he moved towards her, his long strides easily outmatching hers. He caught her by the wrist, both flinching back at the same time as an image of his dying daughter flashed through his mind. For a second he squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly overcome with old

grief, then just as quickly the feeling was gone, along with the memory that had sparked it. He stared down at the woman as she looked back at him with what might have been pity. It was almost as if she knew.

Breaking from her gaze, shoving the repressed memories back down where he kept them carefully buried, he grabbed the strap of her backpack and tugged it off her, pulling open the front zipper and taking out the same wad of cash he had seen her with in the security footage. Nodding to himself, he shoved it back in and placed a hand between her shoulders, guiding her towards his truck.

"Hands on the hood."

"Now is this any way to treat the lady who brought you breakfast?" she teased. He threw her a look and she finally obeyed, bending slightly at the hips. She looked back at him over her shoulder with a smirk, awaiting further instruction. He paused for a moment, finding his thoughts drifting into inappropriate territory at he looked her over, coming back to his senses when he heard her chuckle. More than a little irked by her insistent misbehavior, he took out his cuffs and slapped them around her wrists, tightening them behind her back; but his rough conduct only seemed to amuse her more.

"Looks like you finally get your wish, chief," she told him. He tried to ignore the suggestive comment and all the depraved thoughts it stirred up in him, but as he took her by the arm and led her to the back seat, the image of him taking advantage of her in her shackled state flashed through his mind. He tried to shake it off, but the compromising thoughts continued to bombard him. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it wasn't until he let go of her that they finally stopped. Looking back at her, she gave a knowing smirk.

"You wanna explain to me how a thousand dollars cash wound up in your backpack?"

He stared at her from across the table of the station's modest interrogation room as he tucked a cigarette between his lips, eyebrows quirking up as she failed to reply fast enough.

"What can I say, I'm real thrifty."

The look he threw her then suggested any further attempts at humor would not be well received.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she finally answered, glancing at the wad of evidence he had tossed on the table as if to jog her memory.

He took his lighter from his front pocket and flicked it open, but after two attempts still couldn't get the flame to catch. Muttering curses at the malfunctioning object, he failed to notice his suspect's gaze flick towards it, the fire sparking a split-second later. She glanced away as he looked over again and took his first puff.

"Why don't you try me?" he told her, pocketing the lighter once more. He grabbed his near-empty pack of cigarettes from the table, making a note to stop by the store and grab some more on the way home, and went to stuff them in his other pocket but hesitated. He held out the pack, but she shook her head, appearing amused by his congeniality given the circumstances.

"So," he went on, "You were saying."

"The bank manager gave it to me."

"You went up to him, asked for a thousand dollars, and he just handed it over to you?"

"Yeah, pretty much," she smiled.

"Yeah, see, I'm not buying that. Larry's not exactly known for his generous nature, runnin' a bank and all."

"Told ya you wouldn't believe me."

He gazed at her steadily as he blew out a puff of smoke, eyes slightly narrowed.

"Alright, let's try this again. Where'd you come from?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"You know, the whole 'mysterious drifter' thing is really starting to get old, so I suggest you start giving me some answers, or I'm going to throw you into one of the cells until you decide to talk."

"I don't think you will."

"No?" He gave a chuckle of disbelief at her unrelenting cocky attitude, trying to convince himself he didn't find it charming, and leaned back in his chair. He had skipped all the usual protocol upon dragging her in to the station – no fingerprints, no searching the database or taking a statement – ignoring the questioning looks he had received from the other officers as he had led her down the hall. There was something way too off about this one. For the sake of his growing paranoia – not to mention the dangerous attraction he felt brewing – he needed some answers. She smiled at him now in a way that really didn't help that latter part, and glanced down at her still-bound wrists.

"I think," she went on, "That you're going to let me go. You're going to give me back the thousand dollars, and you're going to forget this ever happened."

Hopper gave a chuckle even heartier than the first, as he took another drag of his cigarette, and she soon joined in as they exchanged equally mocking looks at the suggestion. He was still laughing when he felt it; a pleasant warm sensation in the back of his mind. It slowly began to spread, the feeling that came with it better than anything his anti-anxiety pills had ever given him. He was actually smiling. Before he could realize what he was doing, he took out the keys to her handcuffs and reached over to unlock them. He then took her backpack from the floor beside him and stuffed the money back inside before passing it over to her, smiling all the while.

"Thanks, chief. You know, this has been real nice and all," she told him, getting to her feet, slinging the backpack over her shoulder as he calmly looked on, "And although I have to admit I do like some of the nasty things you've been thinking about me all day, I think it's best if we go our separate ways, at least for a little while. Now, I'd really like it if you told the other officers out there that you had to let me go, that the video you and Deputy Powell watched today was insufficient evidence to prosecute. Then I want you to head on in to

your office, sit your ass down in that chair of yours, and finish off those reports Flo has been hounding you about for the last week, because she's about ready to put in a formal complaint about your overwhelming incompetence, and we both know you don't need that shit in your life right now, right?"

He gave an agreeable nod at that, and she smiled. He could feel that something was wrong, a niggling feeling at the back of his mind fighting the comforting warmth that continued to resonate from within, but it had been so long since he had felt this peaceful. So he gave in.

She headed towards the door, pausing as she turned back to him. "I'm gonna need you to walk me out."

"Right," he said with an accommodating nod, stubbing out his cigarette before getting to his feet and opening the door for her.

As they strolled out into the main office area, sparking instant suspicion with their pleasant smiles, Powell approached from his desk.

"Uh, everything okay, chief?" He glanced at the woman, eyes narrowing at her calm demeanor. From Hopper's urgent entry into the station, to this oddly satisfied-looking reemergence, he could only speculate as to what the chief had been up to in the interrogation room; but even that seemed a little too off-the-rails for their unstable leader. Surely he wasn't that reckless. It was the middle of the goddamn day.

"Everything's fine, Powell. Young lady's in the clear. Not enough evidence to hold her, so I'm cuttin' her loose."

"You seemed pretty sure when you brought her in-"

"What did I just say?" the chief cut in, his tone far friendlier than usual. Powell watched him place a hand on the woman's shoulder as the suspicious pair continued on towards the exit, his frown deepening when the chief looked back with a pleasant smile. Now this was just getting creepy. Watching as they disappeared out of the station, he looked over to the other deputy, Callahan, who stared

back looking equally perplexed.

Outside, she turned back to her obliging escort, looking him up and down, deciding he might be worth tracking down again at a later date. He was a big man, towering over her with broad shoulders and big arms. He was a little soft in the belly, but with his icy blue eyes and handsome features, she found that easy to look past – in fact, it only seemed to add to his overall appeal. The only thing stopping her from asking him out for a drink right at that moment – aside from the whole 'just been arrested for robbing a bank' thing – was the overwhelming sadness radiating off of him. As curious as she was, she kept her gaze trained away from the blue bracelet around his wrist – such a small object that seemed to hold so many painful memories. Gazing at him now, she couldn't help but feel pity, even knowing her effect was still working its way through him.

"Do me a favor when you get home tonight?"

He nodded, expression curious and a little dazed.

"Keep away from the booze and pills, and try and get some decent sleep, yeah?"

He nodded again, but she could see something trying to come through the pleasant haze, as if the mere mention of his methods of wallowing had sparked a small internal struggle. She offered one last smile, then made to walk away, turning back for a moment to add one last thing.

"And maybe try eating a vegetable once in a while. Benny might be your friend, but he's gonna kill you with all that fried shit."

"I think you may be right," he chuckled, lips parting into an attractive smile. She could see why so many women fell so easily into his trap. He was just the right combination of charming and broken to suck in those looking for someone to 'save'; women looking for a project rather than a partner. She had to admit, it was tempting, knowing how easily he could be persuaded to overlook today's little indiscretion and let her into his bed; but deep down she couldn't deny the guilt she already felt, taking advantage of someone so visibly vulnerable. So she offered one last friendly smile before simply

slipping away.

It wasn't until she was out of view that he started to feel some of his normal senses returning to him. He glanced around for a moment, turning back towards the station as if wondering how he'd even gotten outside, then, as the happy fog began to clear from his mind, found himself struggling to figure out what the hell had just happened.

A/N: I am a huge fan of Stranger Things, and have been harboring a crush on the unorthodox Jim Hopper since the first time I watched it. It wasn't until my third or fourth sitting that this idea for a story came to me. I'd be interested to know what you think of it so far, as it is still kind of a work in process, and I know I left a lot of questions unanswered in this first chapter (including the name of our OC!), but there is reasoning behind this! I do plan on continuing this right on through to the end of season one (assuming there will be people who want me to continue). I look forward to any feedback, and I'm sure chapter two will be underway shortly. Thanks for reading!

Song used in opening scene: 'Rain' by Dragon

2. Chapter 2: After-Effects

AFTER-EFFECT

It was a slow night at Melvald's General Store, but Hopper still somehow managed to find himself standing in line as he waited to buy a fresh carton of cigarettes. The customer in front of him was giving the weary woman behind the counter an earful over a supposedly-faulty lightbulb.

"You don't have the packaging," she told them.

"What difference does that make? You sold it to me this morning, Joyce. Do I need the receipt, too? I shop here all the time!"

"I know, Sam, but I need the-"

"Come on! Just change it over for me, I don't have time for this."

Sam turned as he felt a looming shadow fall over him.

"You and everyone else here, pal. Just pay her the damn eighty cents, for Christ's sake."

Sam's eyes flicked to the badge on Hopper's chest and, with an unhappy huff, he tossed a few coins on the counter, grabbed the new bulb and strode towards the exit, muttering under his breath as he went.

Joyce stared after him and let loose a heavy sigh as she ran her hand over her forehead. "Thanks, Hopper."

He glanced at the dark circles around her eyes and the frazzled halo of her shoulder-length hair. "Long day?"

She gave a tired chuckle as she grabbed a carton of his usual brand of smokes and bagged them up for him. The purchase was a weekly (if not bi-weekly) ritual of his. He had, at one stage, planned on cutting down, but then he had planned on cutting down on a lot of bad habits. It was just another vice on the ever-growing list of things that helped keep him sane, and smoking was probably the least of them.

"Jonathan got called into work this morning," she explained, her voice taking on its usual, strained tone as she recounted the troubling start to yet another bad day, "So I had to take Will to school, and I was running late, and then the car wouldn't start."

Hopper gave an empathetic smile as he took out his wallet. He had known Joyce Byers for a long time, even dated her briefly in high school, and he had never known a more resilient person. She had struggled through a poorly-matched marriage, coming out the other side with her house and two kids, but little else to show for it. She made do with what little money she made working long shifts at the general store, often having to pick up extra hours just to stay afloat. Unfortunately, that also often came at the expense of time she should have been spending with her two boys. But no matter what, she would never let them go wanting. She would be happy to lose any amount of sleep so long as they were happy. Hopper admired her for that.

Opening up the tired, brown-leather wallet, he found it empty. He could have sworn he'd had a ten and a five in there leftover from the previous night's trip to the liquor store. He knew he'd spent most of the five on his lunchtime burger and fries, and the only other place he had been to was Benny's diner that morning. But no. The drifter woman had paid for that meal for him. He patted his pockets, hoping to find something more than a few coins, but came up short. Shaking his head, he turned back to Joyce. "Damn it."

"What's wrong?"

"Forget the carton," he told her, "I'll just take a pack."

She handed it over to him, accepting the coins he passed over in exchange – just enough to cover another day's habit until he could get to an ATM.

"Enjoy the rest of your night, Joyce," he told her, very much aware of his tired tone, hoping she wouldn't take it personally; but she was in her own little world as her worried mind went back to her boys.

"Hey."

She looked up at him.

"If you have any more trouble with your car, give me a call, okay?" he said, "I'll come 'round and have a look at it for you."

"Yeah. Thanks, Hop."

Stepping out into the cold night air, he pulled open the packet of cigarettes and fished around in his pocket for his lighter, aware of how desperate the action felt. Taking his first puff, he tipped his head back in relief as the rush of nicotine hit him. He glanced over at his truck, then in both directions up the street. He could go home, hope that he had a few cans of beer leftover from the previous night's binge, and sink himself into his usual drunken slumber. Or he could hit up one of his regular haunts and try to score a two-for-one – something to warm his stomach, and someone to warm his bed. Taking a final drag on his cigarette, he flicked it down, ground it out on the pavement, and came to a decision.

It was dark and scarcely populated inside the aptly-named Hideaway – two of the main reasons Hopper frequented the establishment. Though most of the regulars were well aware of who he was, he liked to at least try to be discreet when indulging in some of his more disreputable behaviors, even making the effort to head home and change out of his uniform before stepping foot inside. As he approached the bar he offered a brief nod to the bartender, then scanned the room for potential companions. Much to his disappointment, the only woman in sight was someone with an even worse reputation than him; an aging blonde named Veronica, and the only thing bright about her was her lipstick. Just as he spotted her turning her leering gaze in his direction, he slipped away into a seat at the far end of the counter.

"Evening, Chief," the man behind the counter greeted him, "Usual?"

"Make it a double," Hopper nodded. As he waited for his accustomed beverage, he turned his gaze up to the television above the bar, giving the Pepsi commercial his avid attention as he avoided the eyes still burning into him from across the room. He swiped up the tumbler of whiskey the moment was placed in front of him, but

second later it was back on the counter. He grimaced.

"You change brands or somethin'?" he asked, but the bartender shook his head.

Picking the glass up once more, he swirled the contents around and held it up to the light as if it might somehow reveal the cause of the horrid taste.

"You want something else?" the bartender asked hesitantly, watching him.

"Yeah, maybe just a beer. Thanks, Bill."

This time, after the first sip, he almost gagged. He had heard that cigarettes could affect taste buds, but his beer had tasted fine the night before. Surely they couldn't change that quickly. Ignoring the embarrassing fear of never again being able to enjoy his favorite method of wallowing, he did something he had never done before in a bar – he ordered a coke. The few mouthfuls of alcohol he had managed to get down had still managed to create a comforting pit of warmth in his stomach, and the sensation triggered something deep in his memory that he couldn't quite recall. Frowning at the foggy thought, his attention was drawn to the front exit as a cackling (and evidently drunk) Veronica stumbled out the door with her ride for the evening. Now confident that he could turn his attention away from the idiot box without accidentally initiating a come-on to one of the few women he had ever turned down in a bar, he allowed his gaze to wander.

From the back of the room, the dulcet sounds of Dolly Parton's 'Jolene' began to fade, soon replaced by a louder, grittier drumbeat. Hopper glanced up. He had grown accustomed to a certain atmosphere among the usual patrons, and Michael Jackson was not an artist he would have associated with any of the weary-looking blue-collar workers. He spotted the source of the song choice heading his way. Her clothes were different, no longer the worn, scruffy-looking outfit of a woman on the road; in fact they looked brand new. Her hair was different, too, he noticed; the half-up braid giving him a better look at her face. She seemed to pause as she noticed him, her eyes darting briefly to the front door before she continued

on to take a seat a couple of spaces down from his own. It was close enough to anticipate conversation, but not so close as to suggest any real familiarity.

"You again," he said, after waiting for her to settle in with a drink of her own, keeping his tone as even as possible. She glanced over at him as she swirled her bottle of beer, looking almost bored.

"We've gotta stop meeting like this, Chief," she joked dryly, "People are gonna start talking." He chuckled and watched as she finally took a swig of her drink.

"You even old enough to be drinking?"

She threw him a look. "That's your best, huh?"

The corner of his mouth turned up before he took a mouthful of his own drink. She was young – younger than him at least – but certainly not enough to warrant any sort of investigation.

"You need to see some ID?" she asked.

"Do drifters even have ID?" he quipped, appreciating the reluctant smile he got in return. It fell away after a moment as she stared at him, an odd expression flickering across her face, but just as quickly it was gone and she was back to sipping her Schlitz.

"Where would the mystery be in that?" she replied.

He watched her for a moment, the cop half of his brain reminding him of how little he knew about her, the off-the-clock-boozer half urging him to begin his usual dance – the flirting, the drinks, and then eventually the casual suggestion that they go back to his. But something told him she wouldn't fall for that as easily as the others.

"So, you got through the whole case already?"

He looked up at her, breaking from his thoughts, and frowned. "What?"

"The beer?"

He stared at her for a moment before recalling their initial run-in on the previous, dreary night. He realized she must have seen the case through the window.

"Can't remember?" she guessed. "Probably not a good sign, then."

"Not all of it," he replied, hoping he was right.

She nodded and glanced down at the coke in front of him before turning to check out the remaining crowd. "Not here for the alcohol, then?"

He glanced at her over the rim of his glass as he polished off the remainder of the sweet soda, and caught the mischievous glint in her eye. Another vague memory from earlier that day tried to resurface, but once again he found it difficult to recall. His brows quirked together as he fought to dig it up.

"What are you here for?" he asked instead.

"It was listed as one of Hawkins must-see attractions, so I thought I'd check it out."

"Right," he replied, gesturing to Bill for a refill, "I see you already ticked Benny's diner off that list, huh? What's next, Bradley's Big Buy?"

"I was working my way up to it."

He smiled and they sat for a moment in a more comfortable silence. The noise around them started to build as more patrons filtered in. Hopper spotted a familiar face among the latest group of newcomers and turned back to his drink with an awkward grimace. The woman threw a scowl in his direction before following her date towards a booth in the back. She seemed caught between ignoring him completely, and making a show of her latest squeeze. Hopper risked a glance at his new drinking companion and found her staring after the couple with an amused smirk.

"Old flame?" she asked.

He didn't appear to find it as funny, his customary look of weary

apathy finally making its return. And just when he thought his day was starting to turn around. He wasn't proud of the way he had treated (and continued to treat) the women he dated – though he wasn't sure getting drunk and having clumsy, unfeeling sex could be constituted as a date, anyway – but it sure as hell didn't mean he was about to stop. He was well aware of how much of a jerk that made him, but the way he saw it, he was doing them a favor by cutting things off early. They didn't need someone like him in their life. They could do a lot better than a cynical, old divorcee. Looking over at the young woman beside him, he wondered if she might be the next one he'd manage to disappoint. She looked back at him in a way that might almost have been a challenge.

"How long are you plannin' on sticking around?" he asked casually.

"I've got some things I need to take care of here. After that, who knows?"

"You got family here or somethin'?"

"Not exactly."

He narrowed his eyes at the ambiguous reply.

"Old friends," she went on quickly, scrambling for a less conspicuous answer.

"It's a small town," he replied, "I'd probably know them."

"I doubt it."

"Try me."

She caught the edge to his response, the sharpness to his gaze. Things were quickly turning from friendly conversation to borderline interrogation.

"They work at the Department of Energy. Know much about it?"

"No, actually. You don't strike me as someone who'd associate with the government." He looked her up and down. "At least not voluntarily."

She chuckled. "Well, you're not wrong there."

"You ever been in there?" he asked.

She nodded and downed a much larger mouthful of beer.

"What do they do up there, anyway?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

He smiled and nodded as though he had been expecting the response, but as he glanced over at her he couldn't help but wonder from the strange look in her eye if there was actually some truth to that.

"You staying with one of those friends?"

She gave a vehement shake of her head after another mouthful of drink. "No. Checked out a couple of motels in the area, though it was a hard choice between the one with the dirty sheets and the one with the cockroaches. At least the cockroaches keep me company."

If it's company you want... he mused, as he stared down in the dark liquid in his glass.

"I wish I could tell you I knew a better place to stay, but the choices are pretty limited in Hawkins."

Their attention was briefly drawn back to the front entrance once more as a slightly larger group made their way in. Made up of mainly women, Hopper found himself giving them each a once-over, slightly embarrassed to find that he had hooked up with one of them once before, too. He glanced back at his companion again and could tell she was suppressing a judgmental smirk. Hell of an impression he was making on her.

"I can see that," she replied.

Slightly irritated by how amused she seemed at his growing discomfort, he was struck by a sudden thought and the perfect way to turn some of that discomfort back on her.

"How are you paying for that motel room? You work on the road? I

mean, you must move around a lot, right? Must make it hard to hold down a job."

"I came into some money recently," she replied, simply.

His eyes narrowed, that same odd sensation niggling in the back of his mind, and though her reply seemed oddly suspicious, he couldn't for the life of him figure out why. He guessed it was just the general veil of mystery surrounding the woman, and his cop instinct crying out for some answers. Before he could question her any further, she was getting to her feet.

"Leaving already?" he asked, masking a disappointment that surprised him.

She smiled. "I just came to scope out the place. Tick it off my list of local attractions, remember?" She tipped him a wink that he found himself appreciating a little too much.

Just ask her, he told himself. But something was holding him back – that same, unwavering feeling that something wasn't quite right. The moment passed.

"Maybe I'll see you around, Chief," she smiled, a playful smile that proved infectious.

"I don't doubt it," he replied, tipping his glass in her direction. He watched as she downed the last of her beer before offering him one last smile and heading for the door. The disappointment lingered even after she disappeared into the night, and in the wake of her absence he found himself seeking an alternative, though given the state of the crowd he didn't see himself having much luck.

He managed to wake before his alarm the following morning, the nagging ache to relieve himself serving as a reminder of the can of Pepsi he had seen fit to chug right before bed. Groggy, with the foul, stale taste in his mouth driving him towards the bathroom almost more than the full bladder, he glanced to the empty side of his bed and tried to recall the end to the previous night's foray. As he got to his feet, he looked for any sign that he'd had company – discarded

undergarments, empty condom wrappers, the lingering scent of a woman's perfume – but found only the usual chaotic disarray he was greeted with every morning. It was then that he remembered he hadn't even been drinking – the hazy morning hangovers were such a common occurrence now, that the attempts to piece together the previous night's events had become habit. Satisfied he wouldn't be facing any more awkward post-tryst encounters for a while, he headed for the bathroom, snatching up one of the many orange pill bottles scattered on his shelves along the way.

He wasn't sure who was more surprised about him arriving at the station on time – Florence or himself. Recovering from the upset to the usual start to the day, they began their accustomed morning ritual as Florence plucked the cigarette from his mouth with a disapproving frown, only to see it replaced with a glazed donut. Hopper filled a mug with steaming coffee as Florence updated him on the usual, trivial neighborhood complaints, receiving the usual, unenthusiastic 'I'll get right on it' in reply. She watched the chief make his escape towards his office, doing her best to once again ignore his continued descent into hopelessness. It wasn't uselessness – she knew he was more than capable of doing his job, good at it even, but he had yet to bounce back from this continued downward spiral of his. Given her knowledge of its root cause, she could justify going easy on him. Someone who had gone through what he had needed time, and in all fairness he'd had plenty of it. All he needed now was a little push – some sort of wake up call. And she had been waiting on that for months.

"Oh, Chief!" Deputy Powell called out, glancing up from his newspaper.

Hopper paused in the hallway and heaved a sigh. So close.

"Yeah?" he called back through a mouthful of donut, turning back.

"Larry Edwards called this morning. Wants to know if we have any leads on that robbery."

"If you can call it a robbery," Deputy Callahan commented from behind his desk, adding another card to the game of Solitaire he had

laid out before him. Having been filled in on the sketchy details of the apparent crime, he now had a bet going with Powell about the real reason the bank manager had given the money away. His guess was hush money over a secret love child. He had seen Mrs. Edwards. If Larry had somehow managed to snag himself a secret lover, he honestly wouldn't blame the guy.

Hopper's weary expression shifted as his brows pulled together in confusion. "What robbery?"

Powell paused, giving the man a minute for recollection. The chief had never really been known for being much of a morning person. But Hopper's expression remained the same. "The one up at the bank?" the deputy tried.

Hopper stared back. His two deputies exchanged glances. Maybe all the booze and pills were finally catching up on him. Just as he began to feel a mild panic creep in, he lied.

"Right. Well, you can tell him we're working on it."

"You want me to mention the suspect?"

He felt his brows quirk together again before he could stop them.

"The woman you brought in," Powell went on. "The red head. You seemed pretty sure when you dragged her in here."

What woman? Hopper felt a memory flickering deep in his mind.

"Managed to get a print out from the video footage," Powell said, approaching him with a paper clutched in his hand. "Wasn't easy, but turns out that kid at the bank's pretty handy with a computer."

Hopper took the printout and looked down at the hazy image. It took him a moment to make it out, but it was the long hair that did it. It all came back to him, memories triggered back into existence. The night of the storm. The run-in at Benny's. The footage of the robbery. *That* woman. The same woman he had been enjoying a casual chat with at the bar. Why the hell hadn't he remembered any of that?

'I came into some money recently.'

"Son of a bitch," he muttered to himself. Driven more by anger than any real purpose, he stormed towards the door, leaving his mug on one of the desks along the way, tossing the remainder of his donut in the trash.

"Uh, everything okay, Chief?" Callahan asked, rising from his seat behind his desk. "You want one of us to come with y—"

The slam of the front door cut him off and the two deputies exchanged looks once more. Having known the chief for as long as they had now, they knew better than to ask questions.

A/N: I finally finished an update! I know it's been forever since I posted that first chapter, but this story has been sitting in the back of my mind ever since. I still have every intention of continuing with it, and have the next chapter planned out already, so that might be posted within the next week (with any luck). Thank you to anyone who had followed the story and stuck around long enough to read this update. I appreciated every single review you guys left, and I hope you enjoy this latest chapter just as much. I know it's a little shorter than the last, but I think shorter chapters will make it easier to update more regularly.